

Surveying the Field of Language Acquisition

Handbook of Child Language Acquisition

Edited by W.C. Ritchie and Tej K. Bhatia

San Diego, Academic Press, 1999. 740 pp. ISBN 0-12-589041-9. \$99.95

Review by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff and Colin Phillips, University of Delaware

In any area of study, the appearance of a new Handbook promises the hope of a new survey of the 'state of the art' in the field; a handbook can serve as a primer for newcomers to the field, or as a ready reference for experienced researchers. The name 'Handbook' implies a collection with an authority and representativeness that goes beyond a monograph or textbook, and a level of synthesis not possible with the electronic library databases that are now widely available. Against this backdrop and in light of other recent handbooks produced in this area (e.g., Fletcher & MacWhinney (1995), and the chapters on language acquisition in Kuhn & Siegler (1998)), we will evaluate the contribution of Ritchie and Bhatia's Handbook of Child Language Acquisition.

At 740 pages, Ritchie and Bhatia's volume is no less weighty than the others, and at \$99.95 (hardcover only) it falls squarely between the other two in affordability. It is hard for us to imagine however, that a volume this expensive will make it into many course reading lists or personal collections, and will mostly be found in libraries. The volume includes an introductory overview chapter by the editors and 18 chapters on a variety of different areas of language acquisition. The book has seven sections: the first two focus on theory and questions of innateness, maturation and modularity, with a clear emphasis on syntax (chapters by Chomsky, Wexler, Lust, O'Grady, Bickerton and Rispoli). The third section, with only two chapters, deals with lexical learning (chapters by P. Bloom and by Gleitman and Gillette); the fourth section contains a chapter on phonology (Dresher) and one on pragmatics (Ninio and Snow). The fifth section contains three chapters on methodological issues (chapters by Crain & Wexler, by Lust, Flynn, Foley & Chien, and by MacWhinney); section six contains chapters on input (Valian), modality (Lillo-Martin) and bilingualism (Bhatia & Ritchie), and the final section contains two chapters on disordered child phonology (Dinnsen) and Specific Language Impairment (Clahsen). Thus, the coverage of the collection is broad, though by no means exhaustive – for example, there is almost no coverage of such active areas of research as infant language development, computational modeling, or connectionist approaches to language acquisition.

The editors' goals for this Handbook set it apart from other recent handbooks of child language. The focus of the volume is on general theoretical perspectives on language acquisition, with the discussion very clearly framed by Noam Chomsky's views on language acquisition, and in particular on what Chomsky has called the 'Logical Problem of Language Acquisition'. In other words, the focus is on how children progress toward adult linguistic knowledge, rather than on what children know at any given stage in development.

The editors' introduction and the essay included by Chomsky provides a historical and conceptual framework for the whole volume. The editors rightly argue that:

“Whether or not one agrees with the position of Chomsky and his colleagues on the central issue in the study of language, of language use, or of language acquisition, or even with their view of the nature of empirical inquiry – and several of the contributors to this volume do not – it seems fair to say that their thinking on these issues has framed much of the debate in the field over the past 30 to 35 years.” (p. 5).

This perspective on language acquisition leads certain topics to be more prominent here than they would be elsewhere. For example, the rich body of innate knowledge that linguists often propose as a solution to the speed and success of language acquisition may have the effect of making the learner's task *too simple* – so little burden is placed on the learner that it may become surprising that children are so *slow*! The chapters by Wexler and Lust focus on this issue, and offer contrasting accounts of the 'surprising delays' in certain areas of language development, such as passivization and certain aspects of anaphora and inflection. Wexler and Lust provide answers based on maturation and extra-grammatical limitations respectively. In both cases, unfortunately, the authors' give more attention to the *a priori* theoretical desirability of their proposals than to clinching empirical evidence. Note that the 'surprising delay' problem surfaces in a different guise if we massively cut-back the child's innate knowledge: the puzzle is that some aspects of language acquisition are remarkably fast, while others are remarkably slow by comparison. These contrasts must be explained by any approach to language acquisition, and we hope that they will receive further attention in coming years; importantly, though, any solution to

the problem requires a broad synthesis of findings in language acquisition from infancy through at least age 6, a perspective for which authoritative handbooks should be especially useful.

The focus on how children attain adult knowledge of language is also evident in Drescher's chapter on child phonology. In contrast to the many recent works which highlight how much is now known about child phonetics and phonology (e.g. Jusczyk 1997, Vihman 1996), particularly in the area of segmental inventories, Drescher highlights the intricacies of adult phonological processes and how very little is known about what children know in this area and how they come to know it. This chapter provides a sobering but quite valuable perspective. A similar focus, with more optimistic conclusions, can be found in the chapters on word learning by Bloom and Gleitman & Gillette. In their chapter on verb learning, Gleitman & Gillette review and refine their theory of how systematic mappings between verb meanings and the syntactic frames in which verbs appear may constraint learners' hypotheses about verb meanings. Bloom provides many examples which emphasize the fact that for adults noun meanings are much more than abstractions over sets of perceptual features – for example, adults understand that *cat* refers not simply to entities which look and act in a cat-like fashion; there is an essence of 'catness' which transcends the observable features of cats, and plays an explanatory role in our understanding of cats in the world. He also emphasizes the importance of speakers' intuitive *explanations* of how the world works in their judgments about what counts as an 'individual'. Bloom pits these qualities of the adult state against perceptually-based approaches to word learning, and not surprisingly he concludes that perception-based approaches fall short. Given the meanings that nouns have for adults, it is encouraging that children as young as 16 months attend to speakers' intentions when guessing the meaning of a new word (Baldwin, 1991). However, all that is surprising about such findings is that they can be shown in such young children – such sensitivities *have* to exist in learners sooner or later, or children will never grow up!

The chapters on word learning can be read as self-contained introductions to a particular viewpoint, and this is also true of Clahsen's chapter on Specific Language Impairment and Lillo-

Martin's chapter on the acquisition of ASL. Valian's chapter on the role of various kinds of input variation (including negative evidence) on language development also provides a valuable synthesis and evaluation of a large body of research. Based on patterns of replication and non-replication across many different studies, Valian concludes that most variation in the input to learners (within the normal range) has little or no effect on the course of language development. This chapter could be quite useful in a seminar for graduate or advanced undergraduate students.

The contention that Chomsky's views on language acquisition frame much of the debate in the field is borne out by the chapters which explicitly present themselves as alternatives to Chomsky's approach. For example, in a generally lucid and well-argued chapter, O'Grady outlines a 'general nativist approach' to the acquisition of syntax. This approach shares with other common rationalist approaches the assumption that learners must possess a rich body of innate knowledge, but denies that this includes specifically syntactic knowledge. O'Grady presents a number of pieces of an argument that syntax is created by the child out of pre-existing semantic representations (or a 'language of thought', as in Fodor 1975). In order to achieve this objective, O'Grady is forced to posit numerous details of innate semantic representation which are strikingly reminiscent of the syntactic notions that he is intent on avoiding (in particular, as O'Grady points out, it looks a lot like certain aspects of Lexical Functional Grammar (Bresnan, 1982)). Here, as in the chapter by Rispoli on functionalist accounts of language acquisition, both the issues and the phenomena under discussion are almost entirely those defined by formal linguistic theories. Bickerton too, assumes Chomsky's views as the backdrop, but he adds an important extra empirical constraint on theories of language acquisition as he evaluates the importance of relatively input-independent mechanisms, given the transformation of pidgins into creoles.

Despite some excellent pieces, the fact that many of the chapters are either a number of years old or closely resemble material available elsewhere makes the volume in some ways more like an anthology than a handbook. Chomsky's chapter is based on a talk presented in 1987; the chapters by Valian, O'Grady, and Crain & Wexler contain material which is largely available in

more detail in book-length works. The paper by Lust et al. develops an earlier paper by Lust and colleagues, and the paper by Gleitman & Gillette closely resembles their contribution to another recent handbook of language acquisition (Fletcher & MacWhinney 1995). A number of the other chapters were mostly written in the early 1990s, and have only been lightly updated to reflect more recent developments (we can, however, safely assume that the authors of these papers are not responsible for the delay in publication of the volume).

In most cases the chapters in the volume do not attempt to give a balanced or neutral presentation of the debate in their chosen area of language acquisition; instead, most chapters argue forcefully for one particular viewpoint. While this approach can be very useful, we are concerned that it may have been taken too far in some chapters for the purposes of a handbook. In some of the chapters the authors advocacy of their own viewpoint leads to the exclusion of dissenting viewpoints (which may surface in other chapters!), and in other chapters the focus on criticizing the work of others leaves the authors with little space left to explain the positive contributions of their own approach. As such, sometimes the volume has more of a polemical than a scholarly cast. Indeed, a novice to the field of language acquisition reading this Handbook might wonder whether these chapters are symptomatic of a deeper indifference researchers have toward each other's work in this field. We hope that this is not the case, but fear that it may be so. In any case, this view of a discipline is unlikely to make the Handbook an effective vehicle for introducing a new generation of students to the field.

In short, the Handbook of Child Language Acquisition provides a useful and unique view of the field. It should not, however, be taken to be representative of work on child language as a whole, given its focus on theoretical issues defined by Chomskyan perspectives. Since its \$100 price tag is likely to place it beyond most personal budgets, we have no reservations about recommending that you check it out of your local library and sample some of its valuable chapters. On the other hand, we would have more reservations about using it as a handbook for introducing newcomers to the field of language acquisition.

References

- Baldwin, D.A. (1991). Infants' contribution to the achievement of joint reference. Child Development, 62, 875–890.
- Bresnan, J. (ed.) (1982). The mental representation of grammatical relations. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fletcher, P. & B. MacWhinney. (1995). Handbook of Child Language. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Fodor, J.A. (1975). The language of thought. New York: Crowell.
- Jusczyk, P. (1997). The discovery of spoken language. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kuhn, D. & R. Siegler. (1998). Handbook of child psychology, Vol 2: Cognition, perception, and language. NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Vihman, M. (1996). Phonological development. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.